

## REPORT

### Mixed-Ability Individualized Learning

School observation week in Halden, Norway October 2004

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#### How I understand ‘mixed-ability’ and ‘individualized’

‘A mixed-ability class’: a heterogeneous class consisting of pupils ranging from the less able (slower) learners to the more able (advanced) pupils and of pupils with special needs (i.e. they have been diagnosed to have physical or mental disabilities).

‘Individualized/mixed-ability teaching’ (in a classroom setting): you recognize individual needs and adapt your teaching, for example tasks and activities, to individual learner needs in order to “scaffold” every learner in his/her learning process.

#### Examples of “best practice”

<b>Classroom arrangement</b>	<b>Observation:</b> In the classroom each group of pupils share a bookshelf on their desk where they can keep their folders, study materials, books etc. The bookshelves are removable. <b>Comment:</b> The pupils seem to appreciate having something of their own (e.g. they have attached notes, stickers, drawings etc. to their shelves).
<b>Classroom arrangement</b>	<b>Observation:</b> There are large student desks in the classroom and each desk is shared by a group of pupils (2 - 4 pupils). <b>Comment:</b> This arrangement facilitates well group work. The pupils have a wider range of helpers and a good chance to learn how to work with different learners and develop social skills.
<b>Materials</b>	<b>Observation:</b> The pupils have access to different materials in the classroom (e.g. dictionaries, readers, encyclopaedias, maps). They can also use a computer and go to the school library if necessary. <b>Comment:</b> Easy access to supplement materials should encourage pupils to seek information independently. But first pupils have to be taught how to do it and how to assess the information they find!
<b>Materials</b>	<b>Observation:</b> Two different versions of the same English textbook (8 <sup>th</sup> grade) for pupils of different abilities. <b>Comment:</b> The content and the layout of the books are very similar, but the easier book seems somehow a bit “artificial”.

<b>Materials</b>	<p><b>Observation:</b> The pupils can listen to the texts in their English textbooks using a portable CD-player and a headset.</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> The pupils have freedom to choose when to listen to the texts and they don't disturb other pupils. They can also re-listen to the texts.</p>
<b>Organizing instruction</b>	<p><b>Observation:</b> The class teacher gives a new work plan for each week ('arbeidsplan' in Norwegian) on Monday morning and the pupils work following the plan. The instruction consists of "normal" lessons and students' individual work time ('a-time' in Norwegian). Every Friday there is a test on what you have learned during the week and you also have to be prepared to give presentations. The pupils have freedom to choose in which order they want to do the tasks/assignments and at which pace. They can also set their own homework.</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> The pupils seem to know what they are expected to do and they are well focussed on working. 'A-time' and study plan really requires pupils to work independently and use their own initiative. The work plan (a handout) shows you clearly what to do (e.g. subjects, exercises, page numbers). Aims, however, are not listed.</p>
<b>Organizing instruction</b>	<p><b>Interview:</b> Two teachers using work plans ('arbeidsplan') make their planning together with other teachers. They have meetings every week. According to these two teachers taking into account the needs of different learners in the class and making your work more visible to your students doesn't succeed properly without a close co-operation with your colleagues.</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> Both of the teachers had taken up this work plan – idea because they had felt the need to change their teaching.</p>
<b>Organizing instruction</b>	<p><b>Interview:</b> The teacher gives after school tutoring (remedial teaching) once a week. His pupils can decide themselves whether they need more help or not. According to the teacher slower learners attend tutoring eagerly and find it very useful.</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> After school tutoring which pupils can come voluntarily is a very discreet way of supporting those pupils who have problems in learning. (The teacher is doing this free of charge!)</p>

<p><b>Interaction</b></p>	<p><b>Observation:</b> Teacher with individual pupil(s) –interaction → The class teacher goes to a pupil when (s)he puts up his/her hand during an individual work phase (‘a-time’). The pupils with special needs have either a special needs teacher or a classroom assistant helping them.</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> The content and level of interaction is unclear to me since I can’t hear the conversations and I don’t understand Norwegian. I just wonder how the pupils are helped to solve their tasks if they have any problems. Are they given clues (focus on process) or is the main interest in ending the task (focus on result)? How differentiated is the help?</p>
<p><b>Interaction</b></p>	<p><b>Observation:</b> Special needs teacher with pupil(s) –interaction → The special needs teacher and a group of pupils study at the back of the classroom during an English lesson. All the pupils in the class work on the same topic, but the tasks are differentiated.</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> The special needs group doesn’t interact with the rest of the class and vice versa. The special needs teacher reports later that she spoke a lot of Norwegian during the lesson in order to encourage the pupils to answer her questions in English.</p>

**Factors influencing individualized learning in mixed-ability groups:**

There are several factors that affect individualized learning in mixed-ability classes and learning in general. The following list is based on what I saw and learned during the school visits.

**Positive factors:**

- A lot of human resources available (e.g. class teachers, special needs teachers, classroom assistants).
- Cooperation between teachers (e.g. planning teaching together, sharing experiences) clearly encourages teachers to promote individualized learning in their classes.
- Relaxed, flexible and supportive atmosphere in the class.
- Students are given a lot of responsibility for their own learning (e.g. students set their own homework).
- Tasks (especially differentiated) for a longer period, e.g. for a week, give students more possibilities to handle them in their own way and at their own pace.

**Negative factors:**

- The less able students may perceive mixed-ability classes as a problem.
- If you as a teacher can’t see any potential problems with individualizing your teaching (e.g. grouping students, preparation demands, selecting/adapting activities, learning difficulties).

**Teacher training/teachers further education:**

- It is essential to make in-service as well as pre-service teachers to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of individualized learning in a mixed-ability class. This could be done for example by introducing teachers/teacher trainees different cases of teaching mixed-ability classes. Teachers/teacher trainees should be made aware of that going round the class and helping students doesn't necessarily mean that you are really individualizing your teaching.

**Hints for the video:**

- ***How does the teacher introduce the idea of a weekly study plans ('arbeitsplan') to his/her students for the first time (for example at the beginning of a new term)?*** → How does the teacher teach the students skills how to learn and what to learn? How does the teacher assess what skills the learners already have? How does the teacher involve the students from all levels of ability? How does the teacher train the learners towards autonomy?
- ***How does the teacher individualize his/her talk when helping different learners?*** → Are there any differences in waiting times, giving explanations, asking questions, offering clues, giving feedback, correcting errors etc. Could we draw a profile of teachers who succeed (or fail?) in individualizing their teacher with pupil –talk? It is not enough that a teacher manages the content: (s)he also has to manage the interaction with learners!